

**THE NEED FOR A CUSTOMER SERVICE PROGRAM  
IN THE HOUSTON FIRE DEPARTMENT**

STRATEGIC MANAGEMENT OF CHANGE

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## **ABSTRACT**

This research analyzed the problem of the Houston Fire Department's lack of a comprehensive customer service program. The purpose of this project was to develop a customer service program for the Houston Fire Department. This research project employed both historical and action research to answer the following questions:

1. How many of the 25 largest fire departments in the United States have a formal customer service program?
2. What are some examples of customer service initiatives in the public sector?
3. What are some examples of customer service initiatives in the private sector?
4. Which aspects of various customer service initiatives should be utilized to develop a customer service program for the Houston Fire Department?

The procedures employed to conduct this research involved the combination of information gathered in the literature review and utilization of a survey. The "Survey of Customer Service Programs in the 25 Largest Fire Departments in the United States" focused on how many of these departments had a formal customer service program and which services were provided.

The results indicated that the majority of those fire departments surveyed did not have a customer service program. There were a number of different approaches to customer service found in other fire departments through the survey and literature review. The private sector blazed the trail in focusing on customer service and demonstrated how their businesses have prospered from its utilization. Aspects critical to an effective customer service program include a

“Golden Rule” concept, caring attitude, empowerment of employees, and going the “extra mile” for customers.

The recommendations resulting from this research included (1) development and implementation of a training program, (2) empowerment of employees to make a positive and immediate impact for great customer service, and (3) implementation of the customer service program outlined in Appendix A.

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## INTRODUCTION

The Houston Fire Department is the nation's third largest fire department with 86 fire stations, 3,400 firefighters, and 250 civilians, as with most large organizations, there are good characteristics and areas for improvement. Positive aspects include very few line of duty firefighter deaths in our history, nationally renowned aggressive interior firefighting techniques, excellent Emergency Medical Service, and a Hazardous Materials Team that boasts an outstanding internship program with participants from all over the world. Areas for improvement include a lack of emphasis on continuing education training, not imparting a vision of organizational goals to the members, and basically a nonexistent customer service program. The problem prompting this research project is the lack of a comprehensive customer service program in the Houston Fire Department.

The purpose of this research project was to develop a customer service program for the Houston Fire Department. The historical and action research methods were utilized to answer the following questions:

1. How many of the 25 largest fire departments in the United States have a formal customer service program?
2. What are some examples of customer service initiatives in the public sector?
3. What are some examples of customer service initiatives in the private sector?
4. Which aspects of various customer service initiatives should be utilized to develop a customer service program for the Houston Fire Department?

## **BACKGROUND AND SIGNIFICANCE**

Like many other fire organizations, the Houston Fire Department has been able to depend on the traditional, general consensus among its customers that firefighters are dedicated public servants. This is basically true, however a new attitude has manifested recently that significantly raises the expectations of customers towards their local fire department.

In general, customers are learning more of the good and the bad about the fire service. The days of hiding in the fire station and coming out only when called are over. Customers want to see fire department members out doing something or being somewhere. They are fed up with “government waste,” and they want the best value for their money. They may not know what the best value is, but they still know they want it. Customers still like their fire departments; but if someone else could be their fire department for a cheaper price, the bottom line would rule (Smith, 1997, pg.78).

This lack of focus on our customers places the Houston Fire Department on a very dangerous course. The majority of Houstonians work in the private sector where this customer service revolution has long passed the infancy stage. If the Houston Fire Department is to mature into an effective and efficient organization, a comprehensive customer service program must be born. The organizational culture of removing immediate threats to life and property as our only obligation is terribly misguided.

The widespread distribution of fire stations in our community places the Houston Fire Department in an advantageous position. No other government entity is as accessible to the customers as the local fire station. These outposts can be utilized for much more than what is currently offered by the Houston Fire Department. A traditional level of service no longer gets

the job done. “High-Fiving” each other in the street for making a good stop on the fire while paying little attention to the family and neighbors shaken by the event ensures mediocre service. The property received more attention than the inhabitants. Houston Firefighters must deliver a comprehensive service that meets customer expectations and needs.

This research paper was prepared to satisfy the applied research requirement associated with the Strategic Management of Change course at the National Fire Academy. This research relates to the analysis and planning components of the change management model. The need for a transformational perspective towards customer service and the subsequent planning of how best to approach the change necessitates a systematic process. These aspects of the change management model provides this structure.

A desire to change behaviors in the organization towards customers and their increasing expectations can be a difficult journey. Yet refusing to embark on a course towards excellence ensures mediocrity. Houston Firefighters can either accept the challenge or go the way of so many government agencies towards inefficiency and impersonal care. Great customer service is the link to a bright future.

## **LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **Introduction**

The literature review for this project involved research in two distinct areas. First, literature was reviewed describing the ideology of customer service and how organizations have incorporated this concept into their culture. Second, literature was reviewed outlining various methodologies of customer service programs in different organizations.

## **Ideology of Customer Service**

The subject of customer service in the Houston Fire Department is still the exception rather than the norm. This warm and fuzzy attitude towards the citizens in our community in some ways contradicts our “tough as nails” image of ourselves. However, there are some “round peg firefighters” out there, who do not fit into the square holes and ask why not employ a customer service focus in their organization.

You pay a visit to your friendly local library. You find your way to the “tell me what’s ever been written about a particular subject” section. You sit down in front of a blank screen and enter FIRE DEPARTMENT CUSTOMER SERVICE. You bravely hit the “search” button. The machine springs to life. You hear the clutch clutching, the whirley-gig whirling...the supercharger kicks in...the lights dim in the building, the machine sputters and shakes, the screen flickers, lights up, and shows: “No such subject.” You become anxious and bewildered. You obviously require a clinical intervention. A sofa visit to your shrink clearly indicates you should develop a hobby and stop asking dumb machines dumb questions. You begin to macramé athletic supporters for “B” shifters. Your stress vanishes. Life is good (Brunacini, 1996, pg.1).

While the ideology of customer service in the local fire department is still largely foreign to most of our peers, a sleeping giant may be stirring towards this concept.

This lack of documentation about what seems should be a fairly major topic is a curious reality for an occupation that has been intensely and continuously serving customers for the past 200 years. Most firefighters come from the factory with a strong action orientation and a natural inclination to focus more on the “hard” technical-tactical part of



the job, rather than on the “soft” human stuff. That may explain why, up until now, even though we basically have done a good job with our customers, we have pretty much skipped talking, teaching, and certainly writing about the human aspect of service delivery. Perhaps after doing it so much, for so long, the time has come to document some of the basic human relations details involved in fire department customer service (Brunacini, 1996, pg.1).

There are now numerous articles on fire department customer service. The National Fire Academy Learning Resource Center has a large depository of topics on the fire service exploring the frontier of fire department customer service. The private sector has been a great teacher.

In addressing the 1990 annual conference of the International City/County Management Association, Costis Toregas, president of Public Technology, Inc., proclaimed that customers are the dominant driving force in the private sector, and the customer must become the primary focus and dominant driving force in the public sector. Today, there is widespread evidence of an explosion of interest at every level of government in the concepts, principles, and practices of customer service (McClendon, 1995, pg.18).

Past organizational structures focused on the product rather than the user of the product. Henry Ford's old tenant that the customer could have any color of vehicle as long as it was black epitomizes the general attitude prior to the recent revolution in business. What caused this paradigm shift from “the customer be damned” to “the customer is king” attitude? Money, the most powerful force in any economy, is the driving force behind this revolution. Any private

enterprise is assured of a quick demise without adequate profits. If a hotel gives lousy service, the customer and his money will go elsewhere (Gibbs, 1995).

Due to their nonprofit status and a lack of competition, government agencies have been slow to embrace customer service programs.

In most cases, with government there is no elsewhere, even at a time when contracting out and privatization of services have become real implements in the local government manager's toolbox. Anyone who considers the far-reaching consequences of government's permanent guarantee of existence, the lack of any force in its environment that might threaten its survival, will begin to grasp how completely this sense of indifference penetrates all the nooks and crannies of many cities and counties. It becomes an all-pervading cultural norm to which all but the most highly motivated and idealistic employees succumb eventually. Getting a city or county to be customer-driven and service-oriented is rather like teaching an elephant to dance (Gibbs, 1995, pg.15).

Like the aforementioned elephant, the Houston Fire Department must learn the rhythmic moves of the customer service dance. Just as most people learn to dance from others, there must be an initial commitment to training personnel with two left feet about the concept of customer service. Many of the concepts involve plain common sense. Basically, do unto others as you would have them to do unto you. This "Golden Rule" has been around for centuries. Yet, many bureaucratic structures prevent these basic values from flourishing.

Training is probably a necessary but far from sufficient component in the intervention strategy, when it comes to climate and culture matters such as customer relations, teamwork, and morale. The fact is that people usually behave in ways that are quite

understandable and rational, given the structural and cultural contexts in which they work. Those real circumstances can easily overwhelm even the best training effort.

When training contradicts reality, training will give way and fail (Forrest, 1992, pg.23).

This is why it is so important for organizational leaders to be committed to the idea of customer service. “Cooperation and teamwork, with all employees, top to bottom, sharing the same priority - the customer as king - creates a customer-driven culture” (Bohl, 1987, pg.60). This passion from the top of the organization allows training to effect change in organizational values. Leaders that do not model a customer-focus neutralize training efforts that promote it as the way of doing business. If you are going to talk-the talk, you need to walk-the-walk.

Once there is a perception among employees that their leaders are committed to customer service, dispositions that prevent its germination can be removed.

Training and communications of a more general sort are interactive, mutually supportive, and mutually validating in “soft” areas such as customer relations and service. Such issues are essentially moral, not technical. Training can provide the technical means for effectively executing and realizing morally constituted dispositions, but it cannot create those dispositions (Forrest, 1992, pg.23).

The ideological concept that customer service can best be learned by those willing to accept change is partially true. If the training gimmicks do not appear to be genuine and/or employees are treated as a means rather than people with basic needs, success will never materialize. Internal customers (employees) are extremely important to the overall effectiveness of any customer service program.

At Southwest Airlines, service transcends techniques. Southwest's long-term customer satisfaction comes from service delivered from the heart, from choosing service over self-interest. Service is not the result of teaching employees to *act* [italics added] like customers are important; it comes from employees who genuinely feel loved and who work in an environment that dignifies them by valuing their contributions. When employees feel they are being treated humanely, when *they* [italics added] receive "legendary service," they provide the kind of customer service for which Southwest Airlines is so well known. Perhaps this is why their willingness to serve is not an act but, rather, a true expression of the heart (Freiberg, 1996, pg.271).

This genuine care received by employees of the Houston Fire Department from its leaders creates an environment where true expressions of the heart are extended to the public we serve. Fanciful images of Houston Firefighters wanting to hug customers with twenty years of accumulated bad odors and breath as toxic as a Superfund site are unrealistic. Yet, these customers deserve to be treated with as much care as a waitress from Hooters with breathing problems due to restrictive clothing. Customer service comes from an attitude, which begins inside a group. Taking care of the customer starts with taking care of each other. "Follow a mean kid home and you'll find mean parents" (Brunacini, 1996, pg.32).

### **Methodologies of Customer Service**

One of the most effective means of ensuring that customer service is delivered with immediacy is to empower employees to make decisions on how best to serve the customer. Rather than always waiting for an approval through the chain of command, authorize employees to make decisions when it will have the greatest impact. "Accountability to customers has

reshaped organizations, resulting in greater devolution and more responsibility in the hands of front-line workers who are there to ensure that customers are well served” (Parston, 1997, pg.342).

The importance of empowerment cannot be stressed enough in any customer service program. This can be a very threatening idea to strict chain of command institutions. The Houston Fire Department definitely falls in this category.

The principle behind empowerment is to push decision-making and complaint-resolution down to the lowest possible level. You empower the people who are dealing with customers to make decisions in customers’ behalf and to solve their problems on the spot, if at all possible. In addition, you gain the participation and the input of the people who know your customers best and focus them on solving problems, rather than refer customers to superiors or dismiss them with “That’s-company-policy” replies (Cannie, Caplin, 1991, pg.173).

Chief Alan Brunacini does an excellent job of articulating this whole idea of empowerment in terms familiar to firefighters.

The following is a simple, straightforward set of questions each of us should ask and answer to lead us through the empowerment process:

Is it the right thing for the customer?

Is it the right thing for our department?

Is it legal, ethical, and nice?

Is it safe?

Is it on your organizational level?

Is it something you are willing to be accountable for?

Is it consistent with our department's values and policies?

...if the answer is yes to all of these questions, don't ask for permission,

**JUST DO IT** (Brunacini, 1996, pg.69)!

Once the ideology of customer service permeates the organization, legendary acts of customer service begin to be broadcast to the entire organization. This facilitates examples of organizational values that leaders want to replicate in the future.

Leaders of companies that produce outstanding service incessantly pronounce their beliefs and back up their words with actions, of dramatic ones that become corporate legends. Their goal is to nurture a service culture that will shape employee behavior more effectively than rules and regulation can (Davidson, Uttal, 1989, pg.85).

"We tell stories, identify values, talk about our mission and celebrate our people who fulfill that. This is writing on the side of a cave" (Petzinger, 1997, pg.B1). These legends of customer service inside an organization bridge the birth of a corporate culture to a future that fosters employees to add their own cave drawings. Consistent improvement over time provides a wonderful collage of outstanding customer service.

There are many examples of how effective customer service programs distinguish the average company or governmental entity. Placing the customer first, not only produces a wonderful work environment, but it also produces nice profits.

The nasty result of customer indifference costs the average company from 15% to 30% of gross sales. Such prevention - and the cost savings that result - usually demands transforming an organization's culture. It calls for training people at all levels to be

customer-friendly, implementing new strategies, policies, and systems; and getting managers to “think customer” and to model commitment as Customer-Champions. But as America’s leading-edge companies have shown, the payoff of these changes can be both dramatic and rapid (Cannie, Caplin, 1991, pg.1).

There are many examples of how a laser focus on taking care of customers has made champions of corporations in various markets. Levels of service below standard levels of excellence are not tolerated. This consistent attitude towards customers from these corporations blows their competition out of the water.

Federal Express credits its competitive leadership to “customer dedication.” It will climb a mountain in a snowstorm or charter a private jet to deliver an urgent letter.

Companies like Disney, Marriot, American Express, and USA Today are leading the way in quality products and services. And in so doing, they have gained a nearly untouchable competitive advantage (Cannie, Caplin, 1991, pg.2).

A methodical approach to customer service opens great doors of opportunity. The Houston Fire Department is not a corporation looking to boost monetary profits by instituting this type of program. We should be looking for additional opportunities to serve a populace that deserves the very best. It is the right thing to do. Corporations listed above are defined as leaders in their markets. Just as the Phoenix Fire Department is recognized as a leader in the fire service, the Houston Fire Department can be considered in the same class with a proactive approach to customer service. An additional benefit is that outstanding service provides rewards of better equipment, higher pay, and improved fringe benefits. The Phoenix

Fire Department exemplifies this concept. A total dedication to customer service causes warm and fuzzy feelings from happy customers towards Phoenix firefighters.

The Houston Fire Department cannot produce a great customer service program solely through public contacts on emergency scenes. This limits customers' ability to see their firefighters in action on a regular basis. California State Fire Marshal Ronny Coleman states this very clearly:

What I am suggesting is that the fire service get out of the fire station and into the community. I am not talking about company inspection programs where you visit a business once a year to knock on the door, check the fire extinguisher and leave them wondering how long it will be before they see you again. Instead, I suggest that service consists of fire departments finding ways to assist people in conducting the business of life. We are on duty 24 hours a day, 365 days per year. We should be doing everything we possibly can to be involved in the community by being visible and supportive of other things that are going on in people's lives (Coleman, 1995, pg.36).

### **Summary**

The most notable outcomes of the literature review were understanding the ideology of customer service and how various methodologies produce dramatic improvements in any organization. The idea that customer service is not practical in the fire service is totally wrong. Just like all change initiatives, there must be an effort on the part of fire administrators to "think outside the box." Close customer service beyond encounters of the emergency kind is foreign to most fire departments. Analyzing the need for customer service and planning on how to incorporate this into the Houston Fire Department are definitely "outside the box." The literature



demonstrates how customer service is truly generic to any organization, public and private, willing to invest the resources to achieve a basic “Golden Rule” ideology in its daily function.

Isn't it strange that some firefighters are more willing to risk their lives for the public than their egos? Bravery in the heat of battle is a noble endeavor, one that is rewarded in a most immediate way. But in customer service there is no battle, and the rewards are far more intangible. Rather, they are long-term, in the form of increased community support, both emotional and financial (Brooks, 1997, pg.5).

Demonstrative acts of kindness and sincerity toward others destroy impersonal bureaucratic structures. The idea of customer service and the methods of approaching it are very consistent. Empowering employees, seeking opportunities to serve by getting involved in the community, and creating legendary examples of customer service foster excellence. There is no reason why the Houston Fire Department cannot replicate the success of the Disney corporation. The literature proves this point. Otherwise, we can continue down the current path and just be “mickey mouse.”

## **PROCEDURES**

### **Research Methodology**

The focus of this research was to develop a customer service program for the Houston Fire Department. The research was historical research in that a literature review was conducted to understand the whole idea of customer service and the various methodologies. This research focused on public and private sector customer service initiatives and was used to answer research questions #2 and #3. Research question #2 was also answered through the survey sent to 25 fire departments. The Learning Resource Center (LRC) at the National Fire Academy provided numerous books and articles on this topic for the literature review. Additional literature reviews were conducted from the author's personal library. Action research followed the historical research that produced a customer service program for the Houston Fire Department (see Appendix A).

### **Survey of Customer Service Programs in the 25 Largest Fire Departments in the United States**

#### **Population**

A survey instrument called, "A Survey of Customer Service Programs in the 25 Largest Fire Departments in the United States," was distributed to the 25 largest fire departments in the United States. This was used to gain information on customer service programs operated in large fire organizations. This group represents departments in large cities that would most closely replicate the Houston Fire Department in scope of service delivery.

### **Instrumentation**

The goal for this survey was to answer research question #1. The questions on the survey are listed below:

Question #1 asked respondents if their organization had a formal customer service program.

Question #2 asked if their answer to question #1 was no, did their fire department anticipate instituting a customer service program in the future.

Question #3 asked respondents if their answer to question #1 was yes, which services provided in the customer service program were the most successful in their response area.

Question #4 asked if their fire department offered a customer service program, how would they rate the success of the program.

The author reviewed the survey. A copy of the survey is displayed in Appendix B.

### **Assumptions and Limitations**

It is assumed that the representatives from the various fire departments answered the survey correctly.

The survey provides a sampling representation of the 25 largest city fire departments in the United States. No statistical analysis was made to determine the margin of error in the survey results.

### **Tabulation of Surveys**

The participants were allowed thirty days to complete the survey. Of the 25 surveys distributed, 18 were returned for review by the author. All returned surveys were tabulated.

The information from the literature review and survey were combined to answer research question #4. This produced a customer service program for the Houston Fire Department.

## **RESULTS**

### **Answers to Research Questions**

Research Question 1: How many of the 25 largest fire departments in the United States have a customer service program? The author sent out 25 surveys to the largest city fire departments in the United States. A total of 18 (72 percent) were returned. Information was sought to determine if other large fire departments in the Houston Fire Department's peer group had a formal customer service program.

Survey question #1 asked respondents if their organization had a formal customer service program. Responses were as follows:

Yes - 4 responses

No - 14 responses

Survey question #2 asked if their answer to question #1 was no, did their fire department anticipate instituting a customer service program in the future. Responses were as follows:

Yes - 5 responses

No - 9 responses

Survey question #3 asked respondents if their answer to question #1 was yes, which services provided in the customer service program were the most successful in their response area. Responses were as follows:

Attending community events - 4 responses

Tutoring program for at-risk youth - 2 responses

Child safety - 2 responses

Sports program for youth - 2 responses

After the fire brochure - 2 responses

Smoke detector giveaway and installation - 4 responses

Car seat program - 1 response

Toys for needy children - 4 responses

“Make the Right Call” - National program for EMS transport - 1 response

Formal customer service training program for firefighters - 4 responses

Focus on the internal customer - 4 responses

Survey question #4 asked if their fire department offered a customer service program, how would they rate the success of the program. Responses were as follows:

Excellent - 2 responses

Good - 2 responses

Average - 0 responses

Poor - 0 responses

### **Summary: Survey of the 25 Largest City Fire Departments**

The overwhelming majority of respondents to the survey do not have a formal customer service program. Of the four (4) respondents that have formal customer service programs, there is a variety of services offered to the community. The most popular services among the four (4)

respondents were attending community events, smoke detector giveaways, toys for needy children, customer service training for firefighters, and focusing on internal customer needs.

Research Question #2: What are some examples of customer service initiatives in the public sector? The results from the survey used to answer research question #1 offered various services that fire departments are utilizing in customer service programs. Other examples include the comprehensive customer service approach provided by the Phoenix Fire Department.

In today's environment, the smart money has changed the O in MBO (Management by Objectives) from objectives to opportunities. This is an important shift in our mentality and approach. When seeking opportunity becomes the basis of our game plan throughout the organization from the fire gods in the puzzle palace to the firefighters in the street, we begin to use our collective energy to improve operations in a way that actually matches current reality (Brunacini, 1996, pg.105).

The Phoenix Fire Department seized an opportunity of reaching beyond a cautious "toe in the water" approach towards customer service. They immersed themselves by approaching a customer service program as a way of life. This change was facilitated by effectively analyzing and planning the new program (opportunity) prior to full implementation in the organization. The idea of customer service had to be sold to the members.

In Oregon, Tulatin Valley Fire and Rescue witnessed the tragedy of children being killed or injured in vehicle accidents. These children were typically not secured in a car seat or the seat was improperly installed and contributed to the injury. The fire department decided to get involved by providing car seats (purchased following a donation) that were targeted towards low income families for a modest rental fee. The fee was waived if the customer was unable to

pay. The department also provided clinics and inspections for all citizens in the community to assure that seats were installed properly. This program has been extremely successful and filled a service void in the community (Tulatin Valley Fire and Rescue, 1995).

The Los Angeles City Fire Department instituted an Elementary Fire Cadet Program in 1996 to work with “at-risk” children at Marvin Avenue Elementary School. The three-year educational program teaches students from third through fifth grades the basic principles of first aid and fire and earthquake safety. The goal is to make them understand the importance of taking responsibility for their families and the community. This is accomplished through weekly structured, facilitated group discussions led by Fire Station 68 members. Pride and discipline are taught by marching in cadence and preparing for uniform inspections (Cooper, 1997, pg.13).

Programs such as these reinvest in the community by providing role models for children that have a positive impact on their future. Relatives of these children are grateful to the firefighters and broadcast this message to the entire community.

The Austin Fire Department utilizes survey cards to receive feedback from services provided to the community. “For example, give a small survey card to teachers after every public education presentation, or to businesses after each inspection. In addition to valuable information, it can serve to motivate employees to take extra care” (Templeton, 1996, pg. 66). This information provides quantifiable data that the fire department can detail in reports to city council.

The leaders of the Houston Fire Department must also address the needs of their internal customers. These firefighters cannot be expected to go out into the community with a

positive attitude if they are treated poorly by management. Genuine care for their well-being must be demonstrated by these leaders. An aggressive effort must be made to communicate the fact that someone is listening to the firefighters' concerns (Paulsgrove, 1991).

Research Question #3: What are some examples of customer service initiatives in the private sector? The private sector blazed the trail in developing customer service as a major management tool. Bottom line, if a business loses a customer due to poor service, it manifests into reduced profits. The best advertising program is for customers to make your sales pitch for you. This is why it is so important for business to instill in their employees the value of going beyond minimum customer service initiatives.

To instill in employees a sense of the customer as their No.1 priority is the most crucial *internal* [italics added] element for keeping close to the customer. How do the best companies build a customer-oriented culture? It seems to boil down to a combination of cooperation, communication, and commitment (Bohl, 1987, pg.59).

Corporations that do not cooperate, communicate, and make a commitment to the customer diminish their future. The customer always remains the focus of a corporation committed to excellence. Front-line employees that deal with customers are empowered to make on-the-spot decisions. There is no need to find a manager to accommodate a problem that is happening right now. Delays in decision-making frustrate the ability of making a big impact on the customer. A customer service program without empowering employees to correct problems or possess the ability to provide exceptional service well beyond expectations is muted.



Southwest Airlines wants its customers to experience service that makes a lasting impression, service that is kind and loving, service that is fun and makes them laugh. The company believes that treating people with respect and dignity is the key to providing its unique brand of Positively Outrageous Service (Freiberg, 1996, pg.149).

Southwest Airlines' approach to customer service is not complicated. Key ingredients include making a lasting impression, being kind and loving, respectful, and having fun. Like Southwest Airlines, successful companies approach customer service with simplicity and sincerity. Complicated procedures are doomed for failure.

Research Question #4: Which aspects of various customer service initiatives should be utilized to develop a customer service program for the Houston Fire Department? After acquiring documentation in the three previous research questions, all aspects were included in the development of the customer service program in Appendix A. Aspects critical to a customer service program for the Houston Fire Department include the "Golden Rule" concept, sincerity, common sense, empowerment of employees, care, commitment, and going the "extra mile" to name a few.

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Comparisons to Findings**

The relationship between customer service initiatives in the public and private sectors detailed in the literature review are quite similar in overall values. While the various programs may be different, the concept of following the "Golden Rule" weaves a common thread. The

survey of major fire departments demonstrated a lack of formal customer service programs in operation. Some notable exceptions including Phoenix, Denver, Washington D. C., and Los Angeles that have embraced customer service. The other 14 fire departments surveyed are missing a tremendous opportunity.

As Fire Department operational participants concerned with the long-term impact and effect of service to the customers within our community, we are absolutely compelled to examine the most consistently important and memorable part of the service delivery experience to the customer - being NICE (Brunacini, 1996, pg.16).

Customer service screams with simplicity. What is complicated about being nice to people? “Most firefighters come from the factory with a strong action orientation and a natural inclination to focus more on the ‘hard’ technical-tactical part of the job, rather than on the ‘soft’ human stuff” (Brunacini, 1996, pg.1). The Houston Fire Department has been coasting for 103 years on heroic images of action-oriented firefighters strictly protecting life and property. It is time to bring in additional “soft” human programs that directly impact our customers lives beyond emergency services.

With a budget of \$215,000,000 in the 1999 fiscal year (City of Houston Budget, 1998), the Houston Fire Department is a tremendous cost for our taxpayers. There is an attitude gaining steam among taxpayers, which asks “what have you done for me lately” towards their government. The Houston Fire Department can choose to ignore this attitude and run the strong risk of diminishing support from its customers. An effective customer service program derails that locomotive of a negative attitude towards our organization.

Getting a fire department to be customer-driven and service-oriented is rather like teaching an elephant to dance (Gibbs, 1995). If we are going to be in the circus of providing services to a customer asking for more and rejecting higher ticket prices (taxes), unless the performance is worth the extra money, the Houston Fire Department needs to be the best dancing elephant in the city. This dance is choreographed through cooperation and teamwork, with all employees, from top to bottom, sharing the same priority - “customer as king” - to create a customer-driven culture (Bohl, 1987).

This revolution of treating the customer as king can only materialize when Houston Fire Department managers put forth genuine efforts to make their internal customers (employees) feel they are king. Southwest Airlines’ long-term customer satisfaction stems from service delivered from the heart. Service is not the result of teaching employees to *act* [italics added] like customers are important; it comes from employees who genuinely feel loved and who work in an environment that values their contributions. When employees feel *they* [italics added] are receiving legendary service, they provide the kind of customer service for which Southwest Airlines is so well known. Perhaps this is why their willingness to serve is not an act but, rather, a true expression of the heart (Freiberg, 1996).

Chief Brunacini translates this concept from Southwest Airlines into the Phoenix Fire Department in a recent Wall Street Journal article. “I’ve got firefighters in 50 locations. I’m not watching them. You give them good values. I tell them I love them and they’re trusted. And you give them what they need to do the job” (Petzinger, 1997, pg.B1). Again, fire department managers do not need a MBA from Harvard Business School to implement this very basic concept of treating your employees well.

Empowerment is another important tool in an effective customer service program. Without it, there will be numerous missed opportunities of immediately providing WOW! levels of service. “The principle behind empowerment is to push decision-making and complaint-resolution down to the lowest possible level” (Cannie, 1991, pg.173). Firefighters and managers needing guidance on making proper decisions about this empowerment concept should ask the following questions before taking action:

Is it the right thing for the customer?

Is it the right thing for our department?

Is it legal, ethical, and nice?

Is it safe?

Is it on your organizational level?

Is it something you are willing to be accountable for?

Is it consistent with our department’s values and policies?

...if the answer is yes to all of these questions, don’t ask for permission,

JUST DO IT (Brunacini, 1996, pg.69)!

Good old fashioned common sense will help in making the right decisions about empowerment and customer service.

The Houston Fire Department needs to approach customer service by acknowledging and celebrating examples of service performed by its members. This reinforces behavior that our leaders want to repeat in the future. Leaders of fire departments that produce outstanding service incessantly pronounce their beliefs and back up their words with dramatic actions that become department legends. The goal is to nurture a service culture that will shape employee

behavior more effectively than orders and guidelines (Davidson, Uttal, 1989). “Federal Express credits its competitive leadership to ‘customer dedication.’ It will climb a mountain in a snowstorm or charter a private jet to deliver an urgent letter” (Cannie, Caplin, 1991, pg.2). These events have actually taken place, and Federal Express has advertised these legends of service to reinforce their commitment to providing exemplary customer service to their employees and customers. This can also be referred to writing on the side of the cave of the organization’s cultural history. This encourages future cave drawings by employees emulating the past (Brunacini, 1996).

The Houston Fire Department’s leaders cannot approach customer service as a part-time function. We must find ways to assist people in conducting the business of life every day of the year (Coleman, 1995). Implementing a full-time commitment to customer service sets the stage for a reciprocal commitment from our customers. Additional resources, higher pay, and numerous “pats on the back for doing a great job” are benefits that our customers can provide.

### **Interpretation and Evaluation of Study Results**

The author is impressed with the simplicity of great customer service. It is a wonder that all businesses and government agencies don’t emphasize customer service. The survey of the 25 largest city fire departments represents a typical lack of emphasis on customer service. There were 14 fire departments that did not offer an organized customer service program, including the Houston Fire Department.

The four (4) fire departments that had customer service programs were making impacts on their community. The Phoenix Fire Department and Denver Fire Department stand out as

being most effective. Various customer service programs offered among these fire organizations are very similar and yet some differentiation to meet specific needs in their community.

Private sector customer service programs are pushing profits upward and keeping employees and customers happy. The research could not find examples of corporations failing in the marketplace that continually focused on great service. While some initiatives may not have met initial expectations, constant evaluation and adjustment to produce the desired results brought success. Companies like Disney, Marriot, American Express, USA Today, Southwest Airlines, and Nordstrom are leaders in their particular market. Producing quality products and services has gained them a nearly untouchable competitive advantage (Cannie, Caplin, 1991).

The results of this study demonstrate how applicable customer service is to any public or private organization. A “Golden Rule” approach towards internal and external customers makes sense. We all want excellent service. Why would we want to give poor service to someone else? Despite the simplicity of customer service, most organizations do not make it a priority. An attitude of “doing just enough to get by” does not affirm a strong relationship between an employee and customer. This lukewarm relationship allows better companies to attract customers wanting that extra touch of tender loving care. Government agencies may not lose customers, but they sure don’t rate high on taxpayers willingness to approve additional funding for compensation and/or resources.

### **Implications to the Organization**

In order for the Houston Fire Department to implement an effective customer service program, there has to be a strong commitment by the Command Staff of the organization.

Talking about customer service and carrying on with our normal ways of business will make it

one more program sitting in a file drawer gathering dust. There must be formal training for all employees, model behavior by our leaders, empowerment at all levels to make decisions that best suit the customer, and a celebration of the employees' accomplishments that make a positive impact on the lives of our customers.

There are minimal costs to establish a customer service program in the Houston Fire Department. Training our employees will have associated cost factors. The majority of customer service initiatives are performed during normal working hours with some additional costs for hand-out materials. The cost of not initiating a customer service program will be much greater. Examples include unmet emotional needs, customer indifference to our department, and politicians who see no grass-root support to provide more benefits and resources.

The implementation of a customer service program will help diffuse the recent media embarrassments of mismanagement and improper behavior by some employees. A term that has been used often in this research study has been "commitment." There must be as strong a commitment to great customer service as demonstrated by a dog to its master. This attitude will take the Houston Fire Department to unprecedented heights.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The Houston Fire Department provides customer service similar to the majority of large fire organizations, poorly. Approaches to customer service in our department are sporadic, on our terms, and ineffective. There must be an organized and systematic approach to producing an excellent program. This research project dealt primarily with the analysis and planning sections of the change management model. It is up to the Command Staff of the Houston Fire Department to implement a customer service program similar to that created in Appendix A.

A change of this magnitude in our organizational culture must be initiated in a process that removes as many barriers to that change as possible. This is not an overnight quick-fix handled by issuing a bulletin to the members. There must be training, defined outreaches to the community, and empowerment of our employees to make decisions on the front lines of customer-employee contact. It is imperative that the Command Staff not only lead the crusade, but embrace our members with a servant's heart.

This "soft" human approach in the Houston Fire Department is definitely "outside the box" of our thinking and comfort zone. However, it is this author's opinion that no other program in the history of the Houston Fire Department will have as much positive impact on the lives of our employees and customers. After extensive research, the author could not find any examples of organizations embracing customer service that have not measurably improved the organization culturally and financially. This is a powerful reason for the Houston Fire Department to implement a customer service program.

The problem statement for this research project was as follows: The Houston Fire Department does not have a comprehensive customer service program. The purpose of this research project was to develop a customer service program for the Houston Fire Department. A meshing of public and private sector initiatives in customer service is the best means of developing this new program. The study results demonstrate how focusing on our interaction with employees and the community provide unlimited potential for the Houston Fire Department.

It is amazing how timeless and appropriate caring for other people is in our daily lives. The time is now for the Houston Fire Department to go beyond impersonal service and provide



service from the heart. There is no greater reward in life than to serve others. The Houston Fire Department needs to accept that challenge.

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## **APPENDIX A**

## **HOUSTON FIRE DEPARTMENT CUSTOMER SERVICE GUIDELINES DRAFT**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The Houston Fire Department has a long tradition of serving the citizens of Houston. This organization has always been there when the call for help was placed. However, the fire service has entered a new era where the idea of customer service has taken on a new light. The fire service has been slow to join the enthusiasm demonstrated in the private sector. Corporations that have made a total commitment to customer service have become leaders in their various markets. Disney, Nordstrom, Southwest Airlines, American Express, and USA Today serve as examples.

Fire Chief Alan Brunacini of the Phoenix Fire Department, observing the customer service revolution in the private sector, noted the following:

You pay a visit to your friendly local library. You find your way to the “tell me what’s ever been written about a particular subject” section. You sit down in front of a blank screen and enter FIRE DEPARTMENT CUSTOMER SERVICE. You bravely hit the “search” button. The machine springs to life. You hear the clutch clutching, the whirley-gig whirling...the supercharger kicks in...the lights dim in the building, the machine sputters and shakes, the screen flickers, lights up, and shows: “No such subject.” You become anxious and bewildered. You obviously require a clinical intervention. A sofa visit to your shrink clearly indicates you should develop a hobby and stop asking dumb questions. You begin to macrame athletic supporters for firefighters. Your stress vanishes. Life is good.

This lack of documentation about what seems should be a fairly major topic is a curious reality for an occupation that has been intensely and continuously serving customers for the past 200 years. Most firefighters come from the factory with a strong action orientation and a natural inclination to focus more on the “hard” technical-tactical part of the job, rather than on the “soft” human stuff. That may explain why, up until now, even though we basically have done a good job with our customers, we have pretty much skipped talking, teaching, and certainly writing about the human aspect of service delivery. Perhaps after doing it so much, for so long, the time has come to document some of the basic human relations details involved in fire department customer service (Brunacini, 1996, pg.1).

Brunacini’s comments are certainly applicable to the Houston Fire Department. While there are numerous good deeds taking place in our community by firefighters, there is a lack of consistency and structure. The benefit of instituting a department-wide program is to raise the level of service to those we are sworn to help and protect. Frankly speaking, it’s the right thing to do.

“In a recent survey conducted by Money magazine, 37 items were identified as important to the quality of life in a city. Not one was directly related to fire/rescue and only with some vivid imagination could we interpret that the services we provide are even considered” (Marinucci, 1998, pg.4). This lack of vision in promoting new services to the community hinders our future. The Houston Fire Department must reach out to all Houstonians beyond normal delivery of emergency services. Our future is only limited by ourselves.

## **How To Treat The Customer**

Most of us have heard of the “Golden Rule – Do unto others as you would have them do unto you.” This is basically how we should act with every customer. There is nothing complicated about the concept, just hard to initiate with all customers. The sweet grandma that needs help is not a problem providing “golden rule” service. On the other hand, there are instances when individuals we assist are rude, obnoxious, smell, and not even liked by their own mother. This is where the rubber meets the road in excellent customer service.

You may not feel like being nice and are considering chocking this customer, but that cannot be an option. We may have to perform a tremendous acting job of being nice towards these type of customers worthy of an Academy Award. It is critical that we be professional and treat all people as they were a member of our own family. This can be a tough assignment.

The manner in which services are provided by our members include being:

Friendly

Nice

Respectful

Patient

Considerate

Prompt

Caring

Professional

Competent

Resourceful

In addition, we realize that our contact with the customer is typically episodic, short term, and we don't have to adopt them or take them home with us. The typical fast service delivery turnaround time creates a survivable customer service exposure when firefighters encounter tough people/situations. Our closed-cab rigs also give us the ability for private stress relief after a particular difficult encounter. We can engage in such sophisticated techniques as nerf battling each other, D-shift yoga, scream therapy, or colorful oaths. These highly “mature” techniques renerally restore normal biorhythms and prepare us for the next high-quality service delivery opportunity. Team members who always play nice in not nice situations become the customer service role models and the authentic, quiet, day-to-day heroes of our system – there should be a statue in every park in America (a great country) that recognizes the importance of their little (and big) acts of everyday humanity and kindness in difficult situations (Brunacini, 1996, pg.21).

## **PROVIDING WOW! SERVICE**

When we define customer service there are different levels of how the customer rates the performance of their firefighters. The Houston Fire Department does not determine if our service was excellent, the customer provides that evaluation. As firefighters, we are the only ones that set limits on achieving WOW! service.

The goal is to create a WOW! reaction in the person(s) receiving the service, watching the service being delivered, or hearing about the service after the event has concluded. WOW! is the natural, involuntary, intense human reaction when receiving a service that is delivered in a way that is significantly, suprisingly, and positively beyond normal expectations. Taking on a WOW! service delivery objective sends the strong message to everyone in the organization that the team is going to go way beyond “okay” and “all right” outcomes to consistently create a service delivery experience that exceeds what the customer expected or even imagined (Brunacini, 1996, pg.25).

An emphasis of going beyond mediocre service must be instilled into our HFD value system. We have flashes of this during Christmas when a station pools money together to purchase toys for children, firefighter calendar funds going to burned and crippled children, and other sporadic examples. There must be consistency in providing WOW! service. Numerous opportunities are presented to us each day across this city to achieve WOW! responses from customers.

This level of service is much easier said than done. Attitudes of, “just doing enough to get by” assure that the customer’s reaction will be ho-hum. Southwest Airlines has a rich tradition of providing great service. Their term for WOW! service is Positively Outrageous Service. They have developed an organizational culture that is totally committed to exceptional service. This evolution of their culture started with how they treated their employees.

Southwest Airlines believes that the better you treat your people, the better they perform. You have to treat people well because you care about the people who work for you. Loyalty is something you learn. It is not an entitlement. Southwest managers and executives must earn the loyalty of supervisors; and this is done through service. It is a reciprocal phenomenon (Freiberg, 1996, pg. 274).

The Command Staff of HFD recognizes that we must earn the loyalty of our members by treating them well. If our passion for serving our employees is perceived to be insincere, we will never instill into our members a passion for customer service. Organizational leaders in corporations that demonstrate a genuine loving attitude toward their employees are leaders in their markets. While this may be awkward for a profession built on “macho – tough as nails” traditions such as the fire service, it is achievable. In fact, our tradition of crews being like family is only tempered by leaders that focus on the bottom line versus the heart of our members. This Command Staff looks forward to earning that loyalty.

## **EMPOWERMENT**

One of the most effective means of ensuring that customer service is delivered with immediacy is by empowering employees to make decisions on how best to serve the customer. Rather than always waiting for an approval through the chain of command, authorize employees to make decisions when it will have the greatest impact. This can be a very threatening idea to strict chain of command institutions. The Houston Fire Department definitely falls in this category.

Chief Alan Brunacini does an excellent job of articulating this whole idea of empowerment in terms familiar to firefighters.

The following is a simple, straightforward set of questions each of us should ask and answer to lead us through the empowerment process:

Is it the right thing for the customer?

Is it the right thing for our department?

Is it legal, ethical, and nice?

Is it safe?

Is it on your organizational level?

Is it something you are willing to be accountable for?

Is it consistent with our department's values and policies?

...if the answer is yes to all of these questions, don't ask for permission,

JUST DO IT (Brunacini, 1996, pg.69)!

### **SERVICE DELIVERY GAME PLAN**

The following are some of the major behaviors of an effective service delivery game plan:

#### **Quick**

A critical aspect of our service is that it must be delivered quickly. We do not have the luxury of taking our time to take care of a customer that requires immediate intervention. Response times are an important performance measure for HFD. Most customers could care less about the gourmet meal (chicken fried steak, mashed potatoes, beans, and Blue Bell) that you are about to enjoy eating when the lights click on. They expect you to hop on the apparatus with a sense of urgency and take care of their needs.

#### **Effective**

We must be able to not only quickly respond to the incident, but we must be effective in solving the problem. If we become part of the problem rather than the solution, we have failed. No matter how many apologies are offered on our part will leave a warm feeling with these customers. Remember, most of our responses are to someone that has never used our services before. We only get to make a good impression once.

#### **Skillful**

There aren't many camouflaged engine companies or ninja firefighters, so most of our work is very observable and done in public view. Even customers without much experience can identify poor performers and poor performance. Flubbed work wrecks both the customer's stuff and the customer's confidence in us. We must manage and maintain a human performance management



system that consistently prepares, supports, coaches, reinforces, rewards, and improves WOW! skill levels in our firefighters. Simply, it is impossible for our system to outperform the skill level of our members (Brunacini, 1996, pg.29).

HFD needs and will receive more training for our firefighters to assure success in serving our customers.

### **Safe**

When we do something stupid at an incident, there can be dramatic consequences. Performing a very dangerous job in an aggressive and safe manner allows us to be part of the solution rather than part of the problem. Diverting resources to take care of us reduces our effectiveness in helping those that made the first request (customer). Safety cannot be the exception, it must be the rule.

### **Caring**

Once we have managed to show up quickly, be effective, and act safely places us in a great position to deliver WOW! service. This is an attitude that has to be in place for great service opportunities. Caring must first be demonstrated towards each other and then projected out to the community. Chief Brunacini describes this very well. “Like any family, the most critical dynamic and model of organizational caring is delivered by parents (bosses) to the kids (firefighters). This relationship produces independent, empowered, committed team member firefighters who get in between the customer and the problem and don’t give up when things get tough. Good bosses create a level of tough love that eliminates negative, weak-kneed, drop-out, bed-wetting snivelers who lean and never lift. Bosses create and maintain what happens inside the organization. They must support workers that deal directly with the customer during critical service delivery situations. Bosses take responsibility themselves, expand authority in others, and set the stage for either good or bad...**follow mean kids home and you find mean parents**” (Brunacini, 1996, pg.31). Taking care of our firefighters first sets the foundation for WOW! service being delivered by these same members outside the organization.

### **Managed**

“The customer gets a clear message and impression from watching the team perform about how the team is managed and whether the event/response is under control. This impression becomes a major customer confidence factor” (Brunacini, 1996, pg.35). This emphasis of having our “ducks in a row” cannot be overemphasized. If you want to be a PROFESSIONAL FIREFIGHTER you better darn act/manage like one.

## **PROPOSED CUSTOMER SERVICE INITIATIVES**

**Introduction to Customer Service Class** – This class will train all employees of the Houston Fire Department in the principles and methodologies of customer service. It is critical to train employees prior to implementing the program so they understand the concepts and benefits of having a customer service program. This research study, Essentials of Fire Department Customer Service book by Alan Brunacini, and support materials from other organizations would be utilized in the training.

**Child Seat Inspection Program** – In Oregon, Tulatin Valley Fire and Rescue witnessed the tragedy of children being killed or injured in vehicle accidents. These children were typically not secured in a car seat or the seat was improperly installed and contributed to the injury. The fire department decided to get involved by providing car seats (purchased following a donation) that were targeted towards low income families for a modest rental fee. The fee was waived if the customer was unable to pay. The department also provided clinics and inspections for all citizens in the community to assure that seats were installed properly. The inspections have shown that over 80% were installed incorrectly.

**Elementary Fire Cadet Program** – The Los Angeles City Fire Department has an Elementary Fire Cadet Program that works with “at-risk” children. The three-year educational program teaches students from third through fifth grades the basic principles of first aid, fire, and disaster safety. The goal is to make them understand the importance of taking responsibility for their families and the community. This is accomplished through weekly structured, facilitated group discussions led by firefighters. Pride and discipline are taught by marching in cadence and preparing for uniform inspections (Cooper, 1997). Programs such as these reinvest into the community by providing role models for these children and have a positive impact on their future. Relatives of these children are grateful to the firefighters and broadcast this message to the entire community.

**Survey Cards and/or Phone Call Follow-up** - The Houston Fire Department needs to have quantifiable data on how our customers rate our services. This includes emergency responses, inspections, public education presentations, and other divisional public contacts. It is difficult to improve services without data on your good points and deficiencies. There may need to be follow-up phone calls to customers instead of survey cards to provide a higher percentage of responses. There were problems with a similar program in the past of getting cards distributed and ultimately returned.

**Safety Inspections** – Customers will be encouraged to request home safety inspections. Firefighters will provide guidance to the resident on problems identified, Exit Drills In The Home (EDITH), and basic firesafety instruction.

**Smoke Detector Checks** – Smoke detectors should be checked at every residence HFD responds to on an emergency response and at safety inspections. If the customer does not have a smoke detector, follow-up will be to provide and install a detector for the customer. If a battery is found to be dead, the battery will be replaced on the spot and the customer educated to the importance of frequent smoke detector checks and the “Change Your Clock, Change Your Battery” program.

**Birthday Parties** – Many children have great fascinations with firefighters and consider them heroes. The opportunity to have a party in the fire station would be very exciting for a child. The firefighters work with the parents to accommodate the special event, give a tour of the station, and provide a firesafety message. An additional benefit, is the customers get to meet the firefighters and see the conditions of the station and equipment. This may be helpful in the political environment to get improvements.

The Tulsa Fire Department has taken this concept a step further by training firefighters to be clowns (this may not be much of a stretch) that entertain the children and incorporate a firesafety message. The parents pay a fee for the clown and this covers overtime costs. Tulsa presently has a one year wait to have birthday parties in the fire station.

**Attend Community Events** – Firefighters must get out of the fire station and take an active interest in their community by attending civic club meetings, school fairs, National Night Out, and other special events to introduce themselves and answer questions. This fosters a relationship that is presently not being developed. Many citizens don't know where their neighborhood fire station is located, much less who works there.

**Public Service Information Handout** – This handout brochure is to be provided to any customer that we contact, examples include emergency calls, inspections, public education class, giving directions, birthday parties, and blood pressure checks. This item is a great resource that identifies all the programs offered by the Houston Fire Department.

**Care Cards** – The Care Card is utilized by the Altamonte Springs Fire Department as a multi-function format tool to be utilized as a follow-up to express sympathy or concern for customers with whom they have come in contact. The card does not make a specific statement inside. This is left up to department members to fill-in. It will be the officer's duty to see that the card is filled out and forwarded for posting some time after the customer contact. The cards will be personalized to the specific incident of customer contact. Examples of situations where the cards should be sent include: death, illness, fire loss, or other appropriate scenarios.

**Safe-House Program** – Fire Stations serve as places of refuge for children in danger or who need assistance. There is a national program that can be modeled for implementation.

**After the Fire Brochure** – This provides information on various issues such as cleaning suggestions, public assistance, and how to document their losses for insurance claims.

**Owner-Occupant Support Sector Officer** – Typically, our firefighters are more concerned with the fire fight than the customer experiencing the loss. Chief Brunacini describes a typical scenario for a fire in a commercial occupancy. "Generally, the owner would show up sometime during the fire fight (if he could get through the police line). He probably responded because some neighbor called him. We would sit him on the curb across the street and when either the fire or the water won, we would roll up up the supply lines, say 'so long' to Mr. Owner, and go home" (Brunacini, 1996, pg.38).

The owner-occupant sector duties include:

- Call the customer.
- Provide a tour and briefing on what is going on.
- Develop a plan with the customer to get him or her back on track.
- Assist with contacting other parties and possibly provide a meeting place at the fire station or in the area. An example would be a fire in a commercial occupancy and the owner needs to organize a plan for his employees.

These simple actions can be very helpful to someone that has just experienced a traumatic incident and needs some personal attention. We experience fire incidents on a regular basis, but our customers typically only experience it once. Our expertise can be very helpful and in the process gain a loyal customer.

**Health Fairs** – Periodically, the Houston Fire Department working with the Health Department, can provide blood pressure checks, glucose testing, and immunizations. Fire stations and/or civic

centers can be ideal locations and facilitate immediate access for our customers. Guidelines will need to be developed for customers that are found to have a serious health problem.

**Development of Specific Customer Service Performance Measures for Support Commands** – The other support areas of HFD need to develop performance measures to document interactions with customers, internal and external. The general overview on how to approach customer service listed above provides guidance in creating specific performance measures.

These are only a few examples of additional services that can be provided to our customers with minimal costs. The only limitation to these programs is our commitment. The Houston Fire Department is a good organization with dedicated employees. These guidelines on customer service provide an opportunity to “raise the bar” and allow the Houston Fire Department to reach a level of excellence never achieved in its history. It is time to accept the challenge.

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## **APPENDIX B**

**A SURVEY OF CUSTOMER SERVICE PROGRAMS  
IN THE TWENTY-FIVE LARGEST FIRE DEPARTMENTS  
IN THE UNITED STATES**

Fire Department Address Label Attached Here

1. Does your organization have a formal customer service program? If yes, please attach a copy of this program to the survey.  
  
    \_\_\_ Yes  
  
    \_\_\_ No
2. If the answer to question #1 is no, does your fire department anticipate instituting a customer service program in the future?  
  
    \_\_\_ Yes  
  
    \_\_\_ No
3. If the answer to question #1 is yes, which services provided in the customer service program are the most successful in your response area?
4. If your fire department offers a customer service program, how would you rate the success of the program?  
  
    \_\_\_ Excellent  
  
    \_\_\_ Good  
  
    \_\_\_ Average  
  
    \_\_\_ Poor

Please return this survey questionnaire in the enclosed envelope or fax by July 15, 1998 to:  
Houston Fire Department  
Assistant Chief Chris Connealy  
1205 Dart St.  
Houston, TX 77007  
Fax #713-247-8911